Expansion of Electronic Resources: Superhighway to Campus Visibility

Francie C. Davis

Abstract

In an effort to provide easier access to databases, to expand resources to full-text, and to reduce the time-consuming process of updating loose-leaf paper subscriptions. Dowling College Library recently underwent a major transformation in its delivery of electronic information to its customers. The library went from DOS to Windows and online access, from CD-ROM to Internet delivery, from single stand-alone units to networked CD-ROMs, and from paper to a networked digital format. The disruptive transition required a total re-thinking of the delivery of information literacy to the library's customers, a serious look at library relationships, and a greater emphasis on communication, planning and training. In addition, the success of the project seriously improved the view of the role of librarians on campus by providing cutting-edge technology campus-wide.

For the success of Dowling's conversion project, teamwork was used to involve computer services, librarians, and administration in the planning and implementation of the project. Communication proved to be an essential component in fostering a cooperative environment maximizing the project's fruition. Faculty and administration reticence to attend classes attended by staff, was addressed by the librarians' using a well-known management technique and targeting specific interest groups to introduce them in the new information literacy program. The immense success of the entire project gave the librarians a new visibility that has proved quite positive and helped spur them into a leadership role on campus.

This paper will examine the lessons learned and provide some suggestions for the success of such programs. The audience will be asked to share their experience in bringing electronic resources to academic libraries. Discussion will focus on the diversity of techniques that can be used to accomplish this goal.

Francie C. Davis is reference librarian, Dowling College.

Introduction

What a wonderful opportunity we have as librarians. In one fell swoop, we can revitalize our image simply by doing our job, embracing the changes that are being thrust upon us, and demonstrating what we do best: evaluate, select, and disseminate information. At Dowling College, we have done just that. We recently converted to better access to our database subscriptions. We expanded from citation to full text access where available, upgraded from DOS to Windows 95, CD-ROM to online access, stand-alone to networked access, and paper to CD-ROM access. In so doing, we also converted the images of the library and the librarians to cutting edge and technologically astute. Formerly seen as stepchild members of the faculty, the librarians are now a respected segment of the faculty. How did all this happen?

Dowling College is a small liberal arts college located sixty miles east of Manhattan on the Connetquot River in an old Vanderbilt mansion on the south shore of Long Island, New York. Our student body is nontraditional and the main areas of specialization are Aviation and Transportation, Business and Education. Dowling, a relatively young institution, founded in 1955, relies heavily on its electronic resources to supplement its small collection.

When the librarians decided that access to full text databases would be beneficial to our customers, several key elements went into operation. All of them were essential to the project and comprise the *Critical Success Factors* necessary to the fulfillment of the operation. They are **planning**, **communicating**, and **training**. Do not undertake a project of this magnitude and breadth without considering those three elements. Let me repeat them. **Plan** for the conversion and consider the consequences. **Communicate** with *everyone* who will be affected by the conversion. And **train** everyone who will use the new system. All of this is simple, good common sense, you say? It is when you think about it. But when you are deeply involved in it, common sense can disappear.

Planning

You will need three plans to be prepared: a **Technology Plan,** a **Preparation Plan,** and a **Transition Plan.** The *Technology Plan* addresses how such a conversion will impact not only the immediate resources, but also the rest of the campus. For instance, we converted from Windows 3.1 to Windows 95 while the rest of our campus was still using Windows 3.1. The different Windows versions meant that access to our networked CD-ROMs was reduced from whole-campus access to library-access only. Thus, the improvement in resources resulted in a diminution of services instead of an expansion of access. Although we planned for multiple platforms, our technology support reneged on its commitment to our vision.

While formulating this plan, get your Computer Services Department involved. You will need their advice on hardware and the feasibility of the project. Because the success of the project will rely heavily on their technical expertise, it is vital to have their input and to get them to buy into the project. The plan will also need the administration's approval for funding. If you prepare a plan before approaching administration with your request, they will be more likely to support your project.

Your *Preparation Plan* addresses how you will proceed: What vendors will you consider? What databases will you purchase? What are your needs? How do you plan to access the information? What kind of authentication will you use? How will you distribute passwords? How will you deal with a change in password or URL? How will you keep everyone informed? What does everyone need to know? Who needs to know it? What is a fair price for the services?

Keep in mind the population you serve when you evaluate the various full text providers under consideration. Which databases will give you the best coverage for your curriculum? With our non-traditional student population, I sought a database that would support our curriculum and give the easiest, most intuitive access to our customers. One useful byproduct was that it would require the least amount of instruction. Be sure to be thorough in this evaluation because there undoubtedly will be challenges to your decision.

Preview the various resources and get feedback from as many users as possible. Then do a cost analysis to see which, if any, subscriptions can be cancelled to make this project affordable. You may be fortunate with no budgetary constraints and, hence, cancellations. I was not.

Your Transition Plan is very important to the success of your project. You must anticipate all potential possibilities and disasters and be prepared for them. What will you do with the old version of the database when the new one is available? How will you deal with

staff who much prefer the older version of *everything* that you are trying to upgrade? How will you inform everyone of the change? What do they need to know? I provided countless charts, lists, and timelines that served as security blankets to calm my staff's frustration during the "change."

Remember that the planning process helps you anticipate both the expected and the unexpected. Plan for the following:

• *Opposition to change*. How will you handle it?

• *Access to the databases*. What type of security will you use? Will you use IP authentication or passwords?

• *Web access to the databases*. Do you have control of your own web page? Is the web version as good as the CD-ROM?

• *Networked CD-ROMs*. Will access be possible from the entire campus? Off campus?

• *Transition from one system to the other*. What will you do?

• *Training* of staff, students, faculty, and administration. How will you approach it? Who will do it?

• *Reworking manuals* for your customers and staff. When will this be done? Who will be responsible?

It is vital to enlist the support of colleagues. Because change is not always welcomed, this is an important challenge. I found this step especially important. Budget cuts impacted this project and I needed to rely upon each of my colleagues to voluntarily offer a substantial portion of her budget to support my project's success. All of this takes time and patience so plan for it!

Communication

Because transition is really a four-letter word, one of the essential components to consider is communication. Communicate with *everyone*! Communicate more than you ever think is necessary. Let the administration know your plans and their benefit. Let Computer Services know what you are trying to achieve. Let the faculty know what is coming. This will help you to enlist their support. Tell the students what is happening. But above all, let your staff and colleagues know. Tell them what is coming, when to expect it and what the projected ramifications will be. Give them written lists of how the transition will unfold. Remember they will be on the front lines and they need to know what to expect. Do not assume they will understand the consequences of your announcements. Do not even assume they read or listen to your announcements. But if you put everything in writing, they will be able to refer to the written notices when they have the need. And they will.

Training

Training is essential to your project. If you want customers to be successful with your new, improved resources, you need to provide the best opportunity for them. You need to train them on the new features, the idiosyncrasies, and the databases' toots and whistles. Take advantage of every opportunity handed to you. We set up computer literacy classes for the entire campus, volunteered to address administrative councils, presented at faculty colloquia, revamped our Information Instruction classes, and gave interviews for the campus newspaper.

New Visibility

I have not told you of obstacles encountered during this project. You can read about those by going to our library web page at http://library.dowling.edu and reading my paper given at *Computers in Libraries '98*. Rather, I want you to benefit from the pearls of wisdom that I learned having successfully navigated a major conversion of access to electronic resources. More importantly, I want you to recognize the consequent benefits such a conversion can have for both the librarians and the library. To do so, I will use specific examples from our experience.

Let us now look at how the conversion of our electronic resources has changed the librarians' campus image. For some time, the librarians had been providing regional Internet classes and campus-wide computer literacy classes on Internet Searching, Database Searching, Microsoft Word, and PowerPoint. These classes had become quite popular, especially with the secretaries on campus. Although we tried many different approaches to getting the faculty to attend, we had limited success. When we converted our electronic resources, we provided ourselves with a golden opportunity. Everyone needed an introduction to the resources and each person could embrace the change, suffering no loss of face, an important consideration. A major effort to inform the campus of our new resources brought an excellent response. When we instituted catalog access to other colleges' library catalogs, the Associate Provost invited me to show off our gateway. Later, when we began to offer full text online, the Provost invited me to address

the College administration. I gladly accepted. I volunteered to teach a faculty colloquium on the new resources available from faculty offices. The response was enthusiastic.

Perhaps the best response has come from two different programs that we now offer: off campus access to online databases and plagiarism detection on the Internet. Since our campus provides no dial-in-access, the faculty were frustrated that they could not research their topics from home. With Web Access Management, we now provide off-campus access to our online database subscriptions. The faculty are thrilled. From the number of students' calls I have had and my recent statistics reports, I know the service is well used.

In addition, I began to run a program to teach faculty how to identify papers that had been plagiarized from the Internet. It is a back-door way of teaching Internet searching techniques to faculty. And best of all, it works! It is a really satisfying to do a plagiarism search and find the dastardly source. It is especially gratifying when word-of-mouth publicity for this service increases its demands.

Your web page can become a major venue for accessing your databases. We were given control of our web page, redesigned it, converted to a web version of our catalog and provided off campus access to our online databases through Web Access Management, a module available through our library system. The seamless access to databases, catalog, and web page information are all customer friendly. In addition, our web page supports the curriculum with such sections as librarian-evaluated Subject Area Internet Resources and Course Support for our Information Instruction classes. These areas are all designed for ease of use and have been well received by our customers.

As I have mentioned, we now put individually tailored Course Support pages for each of the Information Instruction classes on our web page. Each librarian uses these as his/her basis for teaching each class. Students are able refer to this information from anywhere and we no longer need to print reams of paper and kill a forest to support our program. The teaching faculty is pleased with the customized job each class receives and impressed with the currency of the information.

Each of the librarians is responsible for maintaining the annotated Subject Area Internet Resources pages that are designed to supplement and support our curriculum. Faculty and students alike find these useful as starting points for their research. Among our criteria for inclusion are the following stipulations: each site must be the best on the subject and each site must be good enough to be included in and used as our own personal bookmarks. These criteria helped eliminate the tendency to list all sites on a subject and the pages are, in fact, replacing our bookmarks at the reference desk.

We have used the opportunity of having a library web page to bring visibility to the librarians and, in essence, to toot our own horn. We now put papers we have written and PowerPoint presentations we have given at meetings on our web page for others to see. While this allows meeting attendees access to the information, it also lets the rest of our faculty know that we are professionally active regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Our catalog provides immense customized service to our community. The catalog gateways to other library catalogs are very helpful when students are doing research. Customers can now do research, place interlibrary loan requests, renew their books, and request that items be held for them from home. All of this is great for public relations.

With the new union contract, the librarians are now represented on each of the campus standing committees. In addition, there are other key faculty posts filled by one or another of the librarians. While our new campus visibility is not the sole byproduct of the conversion of our electronic resources, I cannot help but believe that it has a great deal to do with the more positive way in which the other faculty interact with the library faculty today.

Conclusion

What have we learned from our experience? Go for it! Embrace the changes that are coming your way. Indeed, technology is making our job a lot more challenging. But by making our resources more accessible to our customers, by eliminating the tedium of the process of research, and by thrusting us into the forefront of the twenty-first century, libraries and librarians are benefiting from one of the unforeseen by-products of technology. Libraries and librarians are now viewed by many as leaders in this arena. Let's not lose that advantage.